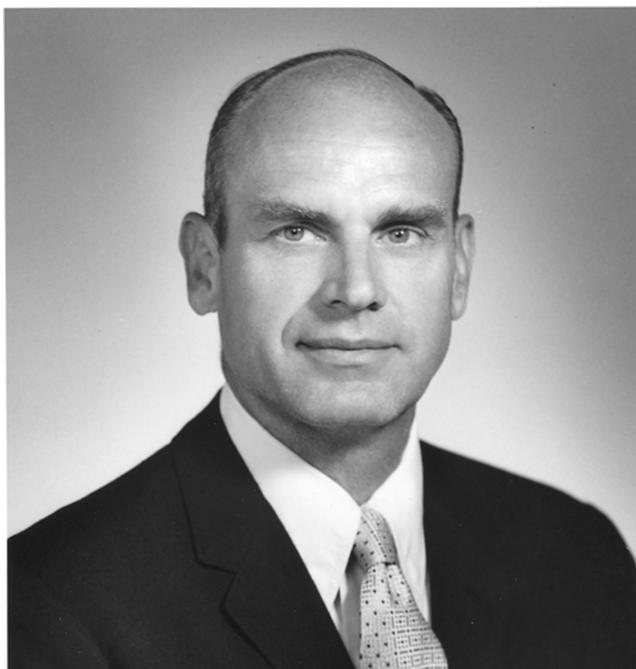




ELSEVIER

IN MEMORIAM

Ralph Coonrad—1923-2019



Ralph Coonrad

Ralph Coonrad passed away in Durham, North Carolina, on April 10, 2019, at 95 years of age. The one word always associated with Ralph was “gentleman.” You could not meet a finer one.

Ralph was born in Tsingtao, China, to missionary parents and lived several years in China as a child. He remained fluent in Mandarin Chinese his entire life, delighting in speaking it to me at our offices in the 1990s and seeing my befuddled look. He went to college at Davidson, where he lettered in football, track, tennis, and wrestling, after which he attended Duke Medical School and then did his residency at Duke University. This was followed by 2 years of military service, taking care of many survivors of the Korean War. He remained an athlete his entire life, running 2 to 3 miles daily up into his late 80s.

In the early 1950s, Ralph, John Glasson, and Everett Bugg started the private practice of orthopedics in Durham, across

town from the Duke University Medical Center. Over the years, and various mergers, their practices joined up and became Triangle Orthopaedic Associates, and eventually EmergeOrtho. During this time, Ralph remained a clinical full professor on staff at Duke, and ran clinics at Lenox Baker Children’s Hospital, where he became the medical director.

He was a director at a children’s hospital because he might have had one of the more unusual orthopedic practices in the country. As a resident, he had spent time at the Warm Springs Foundation, treating polio patients, which spurred his interest in pediatric orthopedics, and he eventually did scoliosis surgery, mostly on younger patients. He also was a well-known hand surgeon, and was a member of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand.

As is well known, he developed the Coonrad Total Elbow, later the Coonrad-Morrey elbow, the most popular elbow replacement in the world for many years now. So, when Duke residents would rotate on his service, they would see a mix of pediatric scoliosis, complex hand surgery problems, and elbow replacements. Ralph designed the original Coonrad elbow by whittling on wood models of the elbow in his garage—so much for hi-tech laboratories.

Ralph was a founding member of the American Shoulder and Elbow Surgeons, and must be the only orthopedist ever to be a member of that group, American Society for Surgery of the Hand, and the Scoliosis Research Society. He was also a member of the American Orthopaedic Association.

Ralph was known for many things in orthopedics, but one thing not well known to the world is his technique in applying casts. Ralph’s casts were a thing of beauty and he taught Duke’s first-year orthopedic residents every July, giving them the benefit of his years of knowledge of how to apply plaster, and later fiberglass.

Ralph was married for 49 years to Evelyn Coonrad, a clinical oncologist in Durham. In 1995, she was abruptly found to have diffusely metastatic cancer of unknown origin. Ralph stopped his practice of orthopedics immediately so he could care for her and be with her in her final months.

I was Ralph’s partner for several years before that retirement, and am proud to say that, for he had been my

mentor in elbow surgery when I was a resident at Duke, and I was fortunate to inherit his elbow practice. In his retirement, my long-time medical assistant, Kim Tuck, had a standing order from Ralph to call him whenever I scheduled a total elbow replacement.

For over 10 years, Ralph came in and watched me do every total elbow, often helping me when I had questions about some difficult part of the case. It was somewhat akin to having John Charnley looking over your shoulder while doing a hip replacement, and could have been nerve-racking, but in the end, no matter how the case had gone, Ralph was always complimentary and told me how well I had done. A gentleman, always.

Ralph and Evelyn were most proud of their association with Westminster Presbyterian Church in Durham, of which they were founding members. They were recorded in the church register as members #0001 and #0002, and Ralph still attended services up to a few weeks before his death.

Ralph and Evelyn are survived by their 2 daughters, Sally and Susan, 3 grandchildren, and 1 great-grandchild. He is also survived by the hundreds of Duke residents and medical students whom he taught, and the myriads of thankful patients who benefited by his gentlemanly manner, his kindness, his knowledge, and his skill. All honor to his name.

Disclaimer

The author, his immediate family, and any research foundations with which he is affiliated have not received any financial payments or other benefits from any commercial entity related to the subject of this article.

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